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Essay Review of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's the Primacy of Movement (Summer, 2002)

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This book is an excellent selection for undergraduate and graduate students in performance studies, cultural anthropology, Latin American studies, or dance ethnography courses. It is also a valuable case study for students who are seeking insights into the process of conducting fieldwork—establishing rapport, employing qualitative methods, and participant observation. With regard to this last point, however, Sklar missed an opportunity to discuss the problem of relationships with ethnographic subjects after the researcher leaves and the writing begins. Sklar only hints at some difficulties:

My relationship with the people changed when I became a writer, an outsider, and I felt the loss. Something that had been was no longer.

It was more than loss. There were loose ends. Differences that in person could be accommodated in the forgiving arms of the fiesta had a sharper sting at a distance. The assertiveness that was a good joke around the kitchen table looked like a transgression of solidarity when it appeared in print. (178)

This reviewer wanted to learn more about how she handled the problem of “when they read what we write.” It is a problem that fieldworkers face whenever they become intimately involved in a community and then leave. It also makes one ask, What did the people of Tortugas gain from Sklar’s presence? These are hard questions that the self-reflective researcher needs to consider.

Overall, I found *Dancing With the Virgin* to be a very rewarding book. Sklar must be commended for her willingness to experiment with ways of knowing and ways of describing. Her work will stand as an impor-

tant contribution to the ongoing debate on how best to represent and comprehend the body in motion, the body in community-building, and the body in generating faith.

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THE PRIMACY OF MOVEMENT by Maxine Sheets-Johnstone. 1999. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. xxxiii + 583 pp., notes, references, index of subjects, index of names. \$85.00 paper.

Each movement of the body is full of soul, the coming and going, the standing and sitting, the walking and dancing, etc. Likewise, so is every human performance, every human production. (Edmund Husserl 1989, 252)

The twentieth century has restored and deepened the notion of flesh, that is, of animate body. (Maurice Merleau-Ponty 1964, 242–243)

Animate form is out there in the world for anyone to see; it is neither reducible to social constructivist thought nor nullified by relativistic theses. It is the generative source not only of our fundamental practices and beliefs, but of our individual and species-specific “I cans,” those possibilities of being and doing that Husserl called upon us to recognize and which we have yet to comprehend. (Maxine Sheets-Johnstone 1999, 357)

Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) published *Logical Investigations* in 1900, initiating a phenomenological movement that would transform continental philosophy over the

next hundred years. Almost a century separates the philosophy of Husserl and Maxine Sheets-Johnstone with Merleau-Ponty situated in-between. Merleau-Ponty and Sheets-Johnstone both admire Husserl; each is temperamentally in agreement with his idea of phenomenology as a stance of perpetual beginnings and his suspension of "the natural attitude" (the taken for granted) in order to discover perceptual phenomena anew. Phenomenology is not fussy about its subjects; a phenomenon is anything that appears to consciousness. Thus, the topics of phenomenology are wide-ranging, but the way they lead back to problems of perception, consciousness, knowledge, and self-awareness is consistent.

I look forward to every new effort of Sheets-Johnstone to bring forward the difficult methodological issues of phenomenology. More particularly, I appreciate her concern to elucidate a metaphysics of movement that both explains and bypasses metaphysical dualism—the notion of a separate animating source for matter (and the body) commonly stated as "mind over matter." From her first book on phenomenology, *The Phenomenology of Dance* (1966), through her study of the bodily source of mind in *The Roots of Thinking* (1990), continuing with her feminist critique in *The Roots of Power: Animate Form and Gendered Bodies* (1994), to her most recent study of movement and nature, *The Primacy of Movement* (1999), Sheets-Johnstone's extensive and consistent probing of the phenomenon of movement continues to inform philosophy of science and natural history, and, not least, the study of dance.

Dance in its rich variety is the movement phenomenon that the original phenomenologists left unexplored. Perhaps its bodily source was taken for granted in their circumvention of bodymind dualism, and therefore hidden in the human artifacts they studied—

from the visual arts to music, from psychology to ethics and politics.¹ But then, they were not dancers, and Sheets-Johnstone is. She divides her attention between two tasks in her recent book: intuitive description of movement phenomena, and reflexive and logical argument. She argues convincingly for movement as the source of cognition; knowledge is first self-knowledge, knowledge that comes first and foremost through "moving oneself." A corollary to this view is that knowledge of the world and of otherness, as such, begins in "self-moving." Knowledge moves centripetally out from "self-moving" and gathers the world back toward "self-knowing" in a relational process. Sheets-Johnstone explains:

We literally discover ourselves in movement. We grow kinetically into our bodies. In particular, we grow into those distinctive ways of movement that come with our being the bodies we are. In our spontaneity of movement, we discover arms that extend, spines that bend, knees that flex....We make sense of ourselves in the course of moving. (136)

I have watched Sheets-Johnstone's work grow and diversify since the publication of her *Phenomenology of Dance* in 1966, wondering why she turned to intensive study of natural history and away from dance studies. Through *The Primacy of Movement*, I understand the importance of her diversions. Merleau-Ponty asked us to believe that space and time were not "out there," so to speak, but "in here," bodily-generated structures of perception. Sheets-Johnstone now asks us to look into the generative place of movement in our living of time and space, its crucial place in historical and scientific investigations of all animate life. No wonder her lectures in Europe and America have earned her

a reputation as a major philosopher in the growth of phenomenology and the informal title of “the Merleau-Ponty of the twenty-first century.”²

The irony in this is her apparent dislike of Merleau-Ponty, and what I consider her misguided critique of his work. The chapter on Merleau-Ponty is the weakest in her book. She needs to discredit his attachment to the terms “lived body” and “embodiment” in order to substitute the more general term “animate form” as more expressive of the body’s interconnection with all life. But I see no reason to parse this way. Animate forms are embodied forms, and they are lived forms, *lived through* in the present tense. As a term, “animate form” takes us into biology and evolution but does not give us access to concrete existentials in bolder strokes, the chronicles of human interior histories in “lived time.” Somehow, “animate time” just does not do the same thing. Sheets-Johnstone also calls Merleau-Ponty into question for outdated (by our terms) descriptive examples, his use of case studies in psychology that would nowadays be discredited, his erratic method, and what she sees as his ontological elaboration (or appropriation) of the poetic style of Paul Valéry.

Her critical detour into the semantics, method, and style of Merleau-Ponty detracts only in small measure from the large contribution she has made in explicating the epistemological structures of movement or, as she describes her project, “how self-movement structures knowledge of the world—how movement is a way of knowing and how thinking in movement is foundational to the lives of animate forms” (xv). *The Primacy of Movement* is nothing less than a phenomenology of movement. Relentlessly, it critiques reductive materialist analyses—those explanations of perception that shrink from process to object, from change and motion to inert “objects of perception” fastened “to a

sense” and localized “to a spot” in the brain or a part of the body. In short, she is criticizing most scientific accounts. In doing so, she appeals to the holistic views of Aristotle, elucidating the metaphysical mistakes of reductionist views of perception. They lack the very ingredient she seeks to restore: that of movement. The dynamics of perception in their varieties are unified by the invariant of movement—through change and stasis, ebb and flow—not solidified into “objects” of perception. Self-movements generate perception. Perception is best explained by a dynamic model, she holds, through internal flux and attendant perceptual *qualia* (or properties, such as smooth or broken), what Husserl would have called *kinaestheses*. He defined these as kinesthetic correlates of perception, or perceptual experiences in their own right (Husserl 1989, 63).

Sheets-Johnstone draws connections between Aristotle and Husserl through their mutual assertion of motion as the principle of life and their nonreductive treatment of animate forms. She brings Aristotle’s concern for movement and nature together with Husserl’s concern for what he called “the life world,” and lets them resonate in her descriptions of thinking in movement. Her work has further implications in light of pressing contemporary concerns about a healthy environment and the relationship of humans to nature. Indeed, she shows how we are a part of that very thing we call nature—as we look out upon what we suppose to be other, only to see ourselves reflected back. We have a share in what we call other: the environment, other animate life. We hone our movement in relation to the environment around us, spatially, temporally, through touch (most basically), and all the other senses. Like Aristotle, Darwin, and Husserl, Sheets-Johnstone is a keen observer of human and nonhuman life, and she is swayed by their endeavors to link life forms.

Movement is primal, there from the start. Quality is inherent in movement, thus also primal in Sheets-Johnstone's phenomenology. Movement and its qualities are always already present in our kinesthetic life from infancy on. Matter in its object status and in the forms it takes is only discernible through the primacy of movement. We can discern the material world only through the movement of our senses as they operate together. The universe is in motion already—and we are part of the animate life of everything. But animate form is not arbitrary, as Sheets-Johnstone helps us to see. On the contrary, there is a built-in specificity in the movement of human bodies that bespeaks our human nature.

Sheets-Johnstone problematizes Merleau-Ponty's almost careless statement that "in man there is no natural sign" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 188–189). It is evident that he is more exploratory than scientific in his descriptions of "the natural" and "the cultural" in human life, and that he finally evolves a historical dialectic that denies neither the natural nor the social. Sheets-Johnstone also questions Merleau-Ponty's earlier view that "It would be legitimate to speak of 'natural signs' only if the anatomical organization of our body produced a correspondence between specific gestures and given 'states of mind'" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 188–189). States of mind neither disrupt the correspondence of gesture to anatomy, in Sheets-Johnstone's view, nor constitute a break with nature. Movement and gesture are full of mind, she insistently affirms throughout. Does not Merleau-Ponty himself assert in *The Structure of Behavior* the foundational notion that he and Sheets-Johnstone emphasize, namely, that "Nature... 'is there from the first day'" (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 133)?

Through her philosophical sources and well-researched critiques, Sheets-Johnstone paints a very large vision of movement as, in her words, "originary." She does not discount

the cultural gloss of movement, but nevertheless will probably not win points with post-structuralists who like to narrow to local instances and jettison the organic whole. The larger scope that natural history necessarily takes does not square with the cultural constructivist agenda in which the body is conceived wholly as a cultural construction and the organic is semantically disposed of. I read in Sheets-Johnstone (as in the epigraph at the beginning) an answer to the excesses of social constructivist agendas. If the body is performative, as Judith Butler has established so convincingly in her works, that does not mean that it has no home in nature. If human identities are socially constructed and thus gender identity as well, it does not necessarily follow that the body is socially constructed through the same process or that biology and gender are unrelated.³ As sociologist Anna Yeatman points out, the central dualist convention in sociology is one that juxtaposes the terms "social" and "natural." For sociology and its poststructural feminist manifestations, nature is a residual and limiting term: "Sociologists elaborate the value of 'social' to cover all aspects of human existence."⁴

Sheets-Johnstone shows that the old division between instinctive and learned behavior is a spurious one that does not accord with facts of life. "Thinking in movement," as she describes it, emerges in a kinetically intelligent manner that is akin to the building of paths and shelters by animals: "Creatures—including human ones—build according to what is available and/or at hand, according to what the contour of the land allows" (508–509). She aims to show with biological science that "intelligence is instinctive," that animals, humans included, could not survive if this were not so (510), and that our movements in their correspondence to affective life are informed by this instinctive intelligence or "know-how" from birth onward. The significance of this lies in the relation-

ship she draws between movement and kinetic meanings—between spatiotemporal semantics and thinking in movement.

Sheets-Johnstone is looking through a larger lens than that of social constructivists, one that posits communal values and ecological responsiveness. She argues convincingly for nature through what she calls the “pancultural” significance of human movement and that of all animate life. Culture does not come first. Nature does. The “I Cans” that culture depends on in the development of human life from infancy onward are prefigured in our natural movement potentials. In a cursory listing of some pancultural movement phenomena, she includes the fact that all humans move forward more easily than backward (we do not have eyes in the back and cannot see where we are going without turning around); all raise their eyebrows in surprise; all eat by putting food into their mouth; all reach for things they want and back away, or run, from those they fear. She speculates that the emergence of modern dance came about through just such elementary searchings into the felt dynamics of human movement, with the understanding that movement can mirror “the life of a certain feeling” (351).⁵ Her explanation weds body and emotion to movement and nature, not necessarily pointing toward Isadora Duncan’s romantic trope of “the natural body,” but not precluding Duncan’s socially based reasons for rescuing nature either—her resistance to modernization and the machine, for example.⁶ Sheets-Johnstone’s work aims to show how humanity is related now and in the past through pancultural movement capacities, structurally and functionally. Somewhere in our given human potentialities lies the possibility for human connection and understanding. It would be hopeful if she were right, for who would want to live in a world where community and empathy were not a possibility?

Sheets-Johnstone’s utilization of Husserl is one of the main strengths of *The Primacy of Movement*, as she continues in his steps toward a less abstract philosophy of essences and a more concrete philosophy of what he finally called “the phenomenological-kinetic method” (Husserl 1980, 1, 117). His later project is a far cry from the objectification of perception that characterized his first works.⁷ Sheets-Johnstone progresses with Husserl toward kinesthesia and shifts toward a metaphysics of process, rather than of substance.⁸ Her project seems immense as she seeks to reverse objectivist orientations, shifting the perspective from which epistemological and scientific studies commonly proceed. For those who care to follow her to the end, and this is no mean task, she does effectively demonstrate her premise “that movement offers us the possibility not only of formulating an epistemology true to the truths of experience, but of articulating a metaphysics true to the dynamic nature of the world and to the foundationally animated nature of life” (xvii).

Her thesis can also be stated quite simply: Movement is the essence of life; perception grows from there, and animal behaviors evolve as a result of dynamically interacting movement patterns. These themes come together concretely in her last chapter, “Thinking in Movement,” which opens with descriptions of thinking in improvisational dance. The chapter progresses to issues of language and whether there is a thinking that lies outside of language. I disagree with her implied separation of movement and language, as when she speaks of the advent of language as postkinetic (506), a stumble from kinetics to language that she herself refutes in other places (383). If her thesis is to hold true throughout, language, movement, and perception would be on a continuum; thus, there would be no such thing as a prediscursive body or a postkinetic language. While infants

do not use adult language, the skills for this are prefigured in infant life and kinesthesia. Thinking in movement and thinking in language may vary in their forms and bodily manifestations, but both of them are nevertheless ways of thinking; as such, they exist on a bodymind continuum. One form might dissolve into the other at any moment, as when we commonly gesture midthought, for example, seeking to elicit the spoken word through the gestured movement. As Sheets-Johnstone herself says:

There is no doubt then but that speech, like all forms of inter-animate social communication, *evolved*. There is no doubt either but that initial articulatory gestures were founded on tactile-kinesthetic invariants and that these invariants were invariantly meaningful from the start. Studies in the symbolic structure of primordial language in fact make the relationship between articulatory gesture and meaning abundantly clear. (383)

Through the courage of her pen and voluminous research, Sheets-Johnstone leaves me thinking in movement—not finished, not satisfied, but moving to new questions and undertows. If movement comes first, where is the place for light? The spot for darkness? What animates the animate?

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Notes

1. Examples of dance available to the original phenomenologists were for the most part romantically conceived and seemingly trivial, as Simone de Beauvoir

recounts in her autobiographical remembrance of the early 1930s. She confesses, however, a fascination for Kurt Jooss's *The Green Table* (Beauvoir 1962, 138–142).

2. The comparison of Sheets-Johnstone's work with that of Merleau-Ponty began with her lectures at the Norwegian University for Sport and Physical Education at Oslo. She will be editing an upcoming issue of the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, an international publication.
3. For Judith Butler's view, see her 1990 article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory."
4. See Anna Yeatman's further discussion of this problem in her 1990 article "A Feminist Theory of Social Differentiation."
5. Like Merleau-Ponty, Sheets-Johnstone shows that perception arises through organic connectivity. A dance, then, is more than its compositional strands, its performance, or its opined politics: "The world is not what I think, but what I live through" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xvi–xvii); "As one might wonder the world in words, I am wondering the world directly, in movement" (Sheets-Johnstone 1999, 486).
6. Why did Isadora Duncan turn toward nature, for example? Ann Daly scrutinizes this more closely as a rhetorical turn: "'Nature' was Duncan's metaphorical shorthand for a loose package of aesthetic and social ideals: nudity, childhood, the idyllic past, flowing lines, health, nobility, ease, freedom, simplicity, order, and harmony" (Daly 1995, 89). But this turn was also rooted, as Daly notes, in Duncan's desire to recover a vision of the body lost to a rapidly modernizing world at the turn of the century. Daly sees Duncan's embrace of

nature as an "anti-modern impulse," and a refusal of the machine (91). Might then Isadora's turn to nature signal her concern to rescue the body in the face of technological assaults, even in terms similar to those that Marshall McLuhan popularized in his media theories as he identified the threats that continue to assail the nervous system through every ascendant move of technology? Facing this challenge in her manifesto for cyborgs, postmodern media theorist Donna Haraway writes, "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" (1990, 223). Duncan's answer was the reverse.

7. In his book on Husserl, David Bell summarizes Husserl's progression in his later philosophy away from the vision of object perception that dominated his early and middle periods (1990, 215).
8. Martin Heidegger, Husserl's most famous student, also developed a phenomenologically open-ended metaphysics of becoming, especially in *Contributions to Philosophy* (From Enowning), his post-metaphysical, postfascist work written between 1936 and 1938, but first published in Germany in 1989, and available in English only in 1999.

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